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AUTHOR Thompson, Jack M.; Patrick, Raymond
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) Program and points out its specific implications for foster parents. The role of a foster parent is extremely difficult, and there is a need for training foster parents to become more effective which, in turn, will have positive effects upon foster children. The PET program, developed in 1962 by Dr. Thomas Gordon, consists of eight 3-hour training sessions and is limited to 25 participants. Through lectures, role-playing and practice, parents learn these communication skills: (1) active listening--the parent learns to reflect back what the child is trying to communicate about his problems in a way that facilitates the child's growth; (2) "I" messages--the parent learns to communicate personal feelings when the problem is his, rather than placing the blame on the child and (3) conflict resolution--working out conflicts so that both parent and child are actively engaged in reaching a satisfactory solution. The program also focuses on the problems of using power in the parent-child relationship, and on assessment and modification of parent values. (Author/AJ)

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF PARENT EFFECTIVENESS TRAINING FOR FOSTER PARENTS

Jack M. Thompson
Sonoma County Office of Education
and
Raymond Patrick
Sonoma County Social Service Department

Recently, a program called Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) has been developed by Dr. Thomas Gordon (1970). This program has been given to a large number of parents and teachers throughout the country, taught by specially trained instructors. The core of Parent Effectiveness Training is a new approach to communication and handling conflicts which arise between parent and child. The authors recently conducted an institute for foster parents and social workers at a conference. The purpose of this paper is to describe the Parent Effectiveness Training program and to point out its specific implications for foster parents. It is the authors' assumption that being a foster parent is an extremely difficult role and there is a need for training foster parents to become more effective which, in turn, will have positive effects upon foster children under their care and supervision.

The training program was originally developed in 1962 by Dr. Thomas Gordon. It usually consists of eight, three-hour training sessions and is limited to a group with a maximum of twenty-five participants. The program stresses participants' learning more effective skills in their relationships with others. Activities in the program consist of didactic lectures, role-playing, and the practice of specific skills in group session along with outside class assignments.

The first portion of the program is devoted to the parent's learning Active Listening skills; that is, when the child has or owns the problem, the parent learns the skills that are typical of any good counselor or psychologist. The parent learns how to reflect back what the child is trying to communicate in a way that facilitates growth on the part of the child and the child's resolving his own problems.

The second portion of the program focuses upon "I" Messages; that is, when the problem is the parent's she must learn to communicate how she feels rather than place the blame on the child through typical messages such as, "You are making too much noise;" "You are not doing your work," rather than the parent's stating that it bothers her when there is too much noise or her child is not doing his work. The assumption is that a child will respond to straight, feeling messages rather than being ordered or put down.

The third portion of the training program is devoted to what is called Conflict Resolution. Conflict Resolution is based upon resolving conflicts which occur in any parent-child relationship, so that the parent and the child work out a solution to the conflict which is satisfactory to both parties. Typicaliy, most parents use two methods in resolving conflict. The first method is authoritarian, in which the parent wins and the child loses. The second method is permissive, in which the child wins and the parent loses. In both of these approaches to conflict, the loser is left with a variety of negative feelings. The focus of the training program is to utilize a Conflict Resolution (joint problem-solving) approach in which neither the first nor the

second method is necessary and, in essence, both the parent and the child work out solutions which are satisfactory to both parties. It is a no-lose method and a far more satisfactory method of working out conflicts.

In addition, the program focuses upon the problems of using power in a parent-child relationship, overcoming typical roadblocks to communication, such as blaming the other party, giving orders, et al., prevention of problems, and assessing and modifying one's values. Through the use of role-playing, tapes, and the parent's trying out the skills at home, participants have the opportunity to learn the specific skills which will enable them to be more effective parents.

Implications for Foster Parents

There is recognition that the role of a foster parent is different from that of a typical parent. Although both are parenting processes, there are additional expectations for the foster parent. They not only are asked to have a basic understanding of child development but are asked to have understanding and compassion for children who have been separated from the natural family. Foster parents are asked to handle difficult children with very little background on a 24-hour-a-day basis. The foster parent also needs to learn how to deal with agencies and their personnel. The foster parent is asked to take into their own home individuals with a variety of problems, a background unique to them, and yet to accept this individual with all their differences. We ask all of this of a foster parent with very little preparation.

What are the implications of PET for foster parents? the implications are based upon the authors' experience in working with a large number of parent and teacher groups. The authors feel that PET has important implications for foster parents and provides a program which, by the nature of its design, takes theory and lays out a program through which foster parents can learn specific skills that will allow them to have more satisfactory relationships with their foster children and to overcome some of the previous conflicts they have experienced. The specific implication of PET for foster parents are as follows:

1. There is a dearth of attempts to provide programs which would enable foster parents, especially potential foster parents, to become more effective in their role. PET can meet this need and prevent many problems which occur in foster homes and which are due to the lack of communication skills on the part of foster parents.
2. Foster parents can learn, in many cases for the first time, how to communicate with their foster children through understanding the child's problem by listening to what the child is trying to communicate, rather than by traditionally butting in, through such techniques of solving the problem before the real problem is known and asking questions which block communication. It is important that foster parents understand and accept the differences in life styles of foster children so that undue demands are not put on the foster child.
3. Foster parents can learn how to send messages as to their feelings when the problem is theirs, such as when the foster children are

making noise and obviously enjoying themselves and the noise is no problem to them but it is to the foster parent. In this type of situation, rather than using the traditional means of blaming the foster children, such as telling them to sit down or complaining that they are making too much noise, the foster parent can learn to send her feelings through a straight message, such as, "This noise is really getting me down and I feel that it is impossible for me to try to get dinner ready when there is so much noise." With experience, the foster parent can learn that most children will respond to a straight message without the blame being placed upon them. This allows the child in placement to receive accurate messages so that they can learn to trust adults and encourages the child's accepting responsibility for this behavior.

4. Foster parents can learn ways of resolving conflict with foster children other than using authority. Traditionally, most parents and foster parents have been authoritarian when conflict arises and made unilateral decisions and, through the use of their authority, have implemented the decision. Through the training program, foster parents can learn to solve conflict through role-playing and specific hypothetical situations by working out solutions which are satisfactory to both foster parent and child without either the child's having his way completely or the foster parent's using authority to have her way. Foster parents can learn that this is a more satisfactory manner in which to

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resolve conflict so that neither party, foster parent nor foster child, has negative feelings about the solution and a healthier relationship is promoted.

5. Most important, which is inferred by the total program, is that foster parents, through PET, can learn to have more satisfactory relationships with their foster children. Through the program, they can learn improved communication skills and more effective ways of solving conflict. In addition, they can learn ways to prevent problems from arising and how to be more accepting of the variety of value systems they encounter in their foster children.

Additionally, foster parents can see the implications of the training program not only for relationships with their foster children but also with their own children, spouses, and others.

From an agency vantage point, instituting a PET program would be time well spent and far more logical than our usual procedure of utilizing most of our resources on corrective, rather than preventive, efforts.

This paper has outlined the implications of a new and exciting training program, PET, that has proved successful with a large number of parents and teachers. The authors feel that this program has practical implications for foster parents and that it would provide them with skills which would allow them to establish more effective relationships with their foster children, prevent problems from arising, and learn more effective methods of resolving conflicts which arise. If our original premise that being a foster parent is an extremely difficult and unique role holds true, then training programs, such as the one outlined, are essential to promote more effective foster-home environments which, in turn, will have positive effects upon foster children.

References

Gordon, Thomas. Parent effectiveness training. Peter H. Wyden, N.Y., 1970.